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WASHINGTON TIMES
21 May 1986

Experts say Soviets learned 'nothing new' from NBC show

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

U.S. submarines have collected intelligence in Soviet waters for 25 years, and NBC told the Kremlin nothing new by reporting the underwater eavesdropping, experts said yesterday.

CIA Director William Casey has asked the Justice Department to weigh criminal charges against NBC-TV for mentioning the intelligence program and identifying its code-name as "Ivy Bells."

The NBC report in question, aired Monday on the "Todays" show, said that accused spy Ronald William Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency, is suspected of giving Russia information on espionage-gathering by U.S. submarines, which NBC correspondent

Jim Polk said may be code-named "Ivy Bells." Mr. Pelton is on trial in Baltimore.

U.S. subs began spying against the Soviet Union at the end of the Eisenhower administration, said American University Professor Jeffrey Richelson, author of books on U.S. and Soviet intelligence.

In 1974, The Washington Post described a similar espionage program, which it said was called "Holystone." That report angered Pentagon officials, who later told reporters it had caused the Russians to improve offshore security.

The following year, The New York Times published more detailed articles on the Holystone program.

Among the intelligence coups in Holystone, the 1975 article said, was photographing the underside of a Soviet E-class submarine, apparently in Vladivostok harbor, the main naval port on the Soviet east coast. Also reported was the tapping into under-sea cables on the Soviet coast, along which the Russians sent military traffic too sensitive to entrust to the airwaves.

Additionally, the article said, the U.S. subs were able to observe closely test firings of missiles from Soviet submarines. They were able to intercept not only communications from the rockets after launch, but computations and orders transmitted among Soviet vessels beforehand. The U.S. subs also compiled detailed "signatures" of Soviet

submarines, the noises they emit as they move underwater.

After the 1975 disclosures, Pentagon officials told The Associated Press that specially equipped U.S. submarines gathered intelligence off Soviet shores, but denied that any had penetrated the three-mile territorial limit.

Mr. Richelson, who describes the program in his book, "The U.S. Intelligence Community," said in an interview that he did not believe the NBC report "is something the Soviets will find valuable. The Soviets knew about it."

Mr. Richelson speculated that Mr. Casey's threat against NBC was "pre-emptive. I think he wants to prevent anyone from coming out with more details of the project."

Another expert on espionage, James Bamford, described Mr. Casey's threat as "the other shoe dropping" after the CIA director warned earlier this month that he would prosecute news organizations that report secrets about U.S. electronic eavesdropping.

Mr. Casey may have been angered that NBC linked the submarine spying with the code name Ivy Bells, said Mr. Bamford, author of "The Puzzle Palace," a history of the National Security Agency, the organization that decodes electronic intelligence for the Pentagon.

However, at Mr. Pelton's arraignment last Nov. 27, defense attorney Fred Warren Bennett asked an FBI agent whether his client had been questioned about Ivy Bells,

which the attorney later identified as an electronic intelligence-gathering operation.

In a report on the arraignment that same day, NBC correspondent Polk said: "There are indications that Ivy Bells refers to a Navy eavesdropping operation. The Navy is known to have submarines outside Soviet harbors listening to what the Russians say."

Mr. Casey, in his statement, said he was referring Mr. Polk's report of Monday to the Justice Department for possible prosecution, but did not mention the NBC report of Nov. 27.

Justice Department spokesman John Russell said the department had no immediate comment on the case.